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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the social science literature dealing with gender relations in marriage and the issues of wife abuse. It is argued that the old anti-woman biases of the literature have not really diminished under the impact of feminism. The sexist assumptions and victim-blaming focus of the new battery literature are examined through discussions about the woman's role, proposals for problem solution, and the general context in which wife abuse is studied. Suggesting that the literature looks for differences between beaten and unbeaten wives and attributes assault to these differences, four specific analyses of the wife's role are discussed, including the: (1) traditional sex-role socialization approach; (2) provocative wife argument; (3) learned helplessness analysis; and (4) personal resource theory. This review concludes that each of these analysis models encourages a victim-blaming focus for beaten wives. The wife-beating literature is described as an area riddled with misogyny which neither challenges the myth of domestic tranquility nor offers a new perspective on wife abuse. (Author/NRB)

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THE TREATMENT OF WIFE ABUSE IN RECENT SOCIAL SCIENCE LITERATURE

27 April 1981

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Introduction: The Emperor's New Clothes

Before the re-emergence of the women's movement in the late 1960s, the social science literature was mainly oblivious to the possibility that women were being assaulted in familial relations with men. It was generally assumed that marriage, especially middle-class marriage, was a "companionate," egalitarian, peaceful affair in which violence played no part. O'Brien (1974) reports that the major family journal Journal of Marriage and the Family did not include one article with "violence" in the title from its founding in 1939 up through 1969, and Gelles (1980) adds that violence against adults in families was especially invisible in the rarified atmosphere of social science literature.

The growth of the women's movement, current family violence researchers agree, has helped to stimulate major doubts about this tranquil view of American families (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Within the last decade, many professionals have acknowledged that power may routinely be distributed unequally inside the family as well as outside it, that the relationship between spouses is affected by the relationship between the genders, that the war between the sexes does not necessarily stop where conjugal relations begin (Gillespie, 1971). Social science has noticed gender stratification. It has noticed wife-beating. And it has even acknowledged a connection between these two phenomena.

The question to be addressed in this paper is whether these recent literature shifts indeed represent a more feminist analysis of gender relations in marriage. Have the old anti-woman biases of the literature diminished under the impact of feminism, or does the literature mainly retain its misogynist assumptions? The answer suggested will be that basically very little has changed. It is true that the analyses have been altered in what are claimed to be basic ways. It is also true that a dramatic shift has occurred in the

sentiments and intentions of the literature. Writings in the area explicitly and continually call for an end to sex roles, an end to the victimization of women, a feminist rather than victim-blaming analysis of wife-beating. But underneath the new analyses and the good intentions flourish the same misogynist assumptions the literature believes it attacks.

Furthermore, there is more to alarm us here than just the fate of the wife-beating issue, urgent though that issue is. The continuation of sexism in the scientific battery literature illustrates the sexist basis of science itself. For, with reference to the classic value-neutrality issue, were science in fact value-neutral or objective, an antiseptic tool for the discovery of pure facts, this consistent anti-woman bias could not recur. Even more, were science simply a craft shaped by the intentions of its practitioners, were science's values created by its participants rather than vice versa, the plethora of good intentions among the woman-battery researchers would surely produce a pro-woman literature. The anti-woman biases of the scientific literature, then, suggest that science is an institution located in a particular social system at a particular point in time. As such, it patterns the actions of we who are in it much more than vice versa. Since it is presently an institution in a sexist society, its workings reflect and contribute to the maintenance of that sexism.* The misogynist tilt of the battery literature, then, affords reasons to despair not only about battery but also about the possibility of moving science beyond its institutional basis in male domination.

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*Some progressives, believing the scientific method superior to all other epistemologies, suggest that we can rescue science from elite control and use it for democratic purposes (e.g., Nelson, 1981; Weisstein, Blaisdell, and Lemisch, 1975). Trained scientists ourselves, we too reject non-scientific epistemologies. But we also are forced by such cases as the battery literature to reject the notion that science presently or potentially reflects some abstract "scientific method." Nor do we see any reason to exempt those of us who Mean Well from the effects of institutional science.

The sexist assumptions and victim-blaming focus of the new battery literature can be seen in discussions about the role of the woman involved (for convenience, we'll call her the "wife"), in proposals for solving the problem, and in the general context in which wife abuse is studied. In all three areas, battery ends up being treated more as an aberrant deviance on the wife's part than as an illumination of how male dominance works in heterosexual partnerships. What follow are discussions of this interpretative shift in each area.

The Search for Differences

With respect to the role of the wife in wife abuse, the literature is preoccupied by the search for ways in which beaten wives differ from unbeaten wives. When differences are found, they are assumed to have caused assault fates. We will have a great deal to say shortly about the questionable status of specific claims that beaten and unbeaten wives differ. But first it must be mentioned that raising this "differences" issue at all exemplifies the tendency in the literature to isolate as deviant not only wife-beating but also beaten wives. The fact is that wife-beating is common, and while it may not be true that every American family encompasses an adult male who is at some point violent to an adult female, still the phenomenon is very common.* In this context, what is called for, in Ryan's (1971) terms, is a "universalistic" rather than "exceptionalistic" analysis, a focus on family structure and male/female relationships rather than on ways in which we may speculate beaten wives differ from all other wives. And indeed, the literature generally acknowledges that what is required is a look at families and social

*For a variety of acknowledged methodological problems in the literature, it is not known precisely how common; but it is accepted that violence against women is a common feature of families.

structure rather than a search for some--any--distinguishing pathology on the part of the victimized woman (Steinmetz and Straus, 1974). So much for good intentions. But in fact what are compared are not American families to families in other cultures or times, or heterosexual couples to other couples, or the well-being of women alone compared to women with men. Rather, what are compared are women categorized as victims of battering to women who have somehow escaped such categorization. And, of course, in this comparison of official victims to official non-victims, any differences which can be found are assumed to reveal causes of abuse.

Since the search for differences is so popular, it is worth mentioning that this quest is methodologically indefensible. First, since the data is and must be based mainly on self-report, we do not know what populations are being compared when we compare self-reported victims to self-reported non-victims, and so we do not know whether differences between the two groups reflect the experience of being victimized, the self-perception, the interview comportment, or some other distinction entirely. Second, the data is correlational, which means that any differences between the groups may be results or accompaniments of violence rather than causes of it. And third, of course, there is a substantial risk of Type II errors in any widescale dredging for differences and throwing away similarities, and we can expect to find some apparent differences between official victims and non-victims just by looking very persistently, even if both groups are actually identical.*

In sum, that the question of the wife's role arises so consistently, and that the official victims are so frequently compared to official non-victims, illustrate <u>a priori</u> assumptions that beaten wives are deviant and somehow complicit. And, indeed, there is no reliable evidence for any strong

*A similar set of criticisms has been raised in the sociology of gender literature concerning the search for male/female differences. See, for example, Tresemer (1975).

distinctions between officially battered and officially unbattered women. Associations which appear in one study disappear in the next, and those which recur tend nonetheless to be very weak. (See, for instance, Gelles, 1980; Star, 1978.) Given the intrinsically flawed nature of the data and the lack of clean results, if science were in fact an antiseptic search for truth, surely it would have been concluded long since that the wrong question was being asked. But the search for differences between battered and unbattered women continues, and with it the implication that battered women contribute to their own plight.

Four Dimensions of Wifely Complicity

Four specific analyses of the wife's role are especially popular in the literature. These include the "traditional sex-role socialization" approach (Martin, 1979; Moore, 1979; Pagelow, 1981b; Walker, 1979b); the "provocative wife" argument (Gayford, 1978; Gelles, 1972); the "learned helplessness" analysis (Walker, 1979a); and the "personal resource" theory (Bowker, 1981; Goode, 1974; O'Brien, 1974; Rounsaville, 1978; Steinmetz and Straus, 1974).

In the "traditional sex-role socialization" approach, wives are complicit because they don't change the situation. They should leave, or let hubby know enough is enough. If they don't do this--and we know they don't because they're still being beaten--it's because they think the situation is inescapable. And if they think that, it's because they believe men have a right to beat women, or it's women's fault if men beat them, or women have no right to protest, or the like. And if they believe this, it's because they mindlessly accept that mythically monolithic "sex role ideology," which everyone knows is delivered in a pink or blue blanket by the socialization stork. Probably they are married to men who are also sex-roles devotees. Probably other causes also intervene, but a wife's musty attitudes definitely contribute to her assault.

The "socialization" line is very popular (c.f. Moore's and Pepitone-Rockwell's respondents, 1979). Nonetheless, there is no evidence battered women are any more consistent traditionalists than those legendary creatures, wives who don't take shit. Ditto for any evidence of differences in creed between battering husbands and the legendary feminist husbands. Ditto for evidence that husbands' and wives' beliefs covary, or that hers matter at all. And ditto, of course, for evidence that any differences we could find caused rather than resulted from violence, or evidence that how individual members of the genders treat each other mainly reflects variance in sex role ideology. Indeed, the socialization argument begs the huge questions of social psychology altogether as to whether childhood socialization (as opposed to adult socialization) affects adult behavior very much, and whether ideations--attitudes and beliefs--do in fact cause behavior (Liska, 1975). Given all this, there is no reason to believe "traditional sex-role socialization" has any bearing on wife-abuse. That the literature continually and groundlessly invokes it does not demonstrate the wife's ideas play any role in her victimization.

In the second specific analysis of the wife's role, the "provocative wife" argument, she asks for it. Thus Gelles divides marital violence into two types, "victim-precipitated violence" and "non-victim-precipitated violence." Victim-precipitated violence, he states, occurs when victims "contribute" through "actions defined as illegitimate by the offender or through provoking their antagonist" (1972:85-6). And Gayford, suggesting men be rated on frustration tolerance and women on provocation potential, predicts the following:

> If men with high frustration tolerance were paired with women of high provocation violence could not be likely to arise, but women of

> high provocation with men of low frustration would produce a combination where violence could be predicted (1978:33).*

Included as possibly irksome are her dowdiness, inability to manage the family and home, good home management, intelligence, sullen silence, nagging, depression, frigidity, and incapacity for deep emotional warmth (Idem, 33-34).

Like the socialization analysis, provocation theory too assumes wifely culpability. But the very nature of what is being explained here--his violence--means that it is the husband who gets to decide in print what he decides in fact: her guilt. After all, the only way for the provocation theorist to determine a wife's innocence is to see whether her husband is beating her. And so, under the rubric of "provocation," she may be charged in literature with a wide array of behaviors some of which are antonyms. Bad home management is sometimes an irritant; so is good home management. Silence can be aggravating; so can nagging. Whenever he swings, a way can be found in which she drove him to it. Indeed, according to Gayford, she may irritate him beyond bearing without doing anything at all. (Ibid. Gayford calls this "passive" provocation.) Thus the operational definition of "provocation" becomes empirically equivalent to "anything she does or does not do which after hitting her he reports disliking." Even overlooking the by-now familiar problems of data based on self-reports and of causal arguments about correlational evidence, the "provocation" argument is unacceptable because, being unfalsifiable, it violates a basic requirements of scientific theorizing. It thus amounts to a priori victim-blaming, not to an empirical demonstration of the wife's complicity.

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*Unfortunately, Gayford does not predict the outcome of matches between high-frustration men and low-provocation women. If the result were violence--and many examples in the literature suggest it may be--then the role of provocation is questionable. See Martin, 1976, for illustrative examples.

Martin points out that provocation theory also constitute a double standard for evaluating wife and husband:

> Most research into the cause of marital violence concentrates on external influences of the husband's behavior. He was under stress, he lost his job, he drank too much, his mother had an extramarital affair. Whatever the rationalization, it serves to excuse the husband's behavior and remove his responsibility for his own acts. The wife's condition is not seen in its totality, but only in terms of what she may have said or done to provoke her husband's anger. The triggering of violent events is almost always trivial (for example, she wore her hair in a ponytail, she prepared a casserole instead of fresh meat for dinner, she said she did not like the pattern of the wallpaper). In no way do any of these events warrant a violent response. Even if the woman did provoke her husband's anger, there can be no justification for these severe beatings. Furthermore, any approach that attempts to change the wife's behavior, in order to change the husband's behavior, only further victimizes her (1979: 40).

Again, by seeing him whole but her only as a gadfly, provocation theory simply axiomatizes her guilt.

One possible provocation deserves special mention for its popularity in the literature: nagging. Thus, Gelles says there is some truth to the image of the "nagging wife who finally drives her husband to belting her in the mouth" (1972:158). Goode claims spouses may become verbal vampires, especially the wife, and it is when the husband can no longer tolerate her semantic attacks that he physically retaliates (1974:38). This image of the nagging wife may correspond to research stereotypes, but hardly to research findings. In Gayford's sample, violence was <u>not</u> preceded by verbal arguments in 77 out of 100 cases* (1975). Gelles points to TV situation-comedy and other media depictions of nagging wives, and to beaten wives' own testimonies, as evidence wifely vociferousness provoked husbandly violence. But it does not follow that because some women believe they might have avoided violence by keeping silent, silence actually would have deterred it. The women who believe this, after all, have seen the same situation comedies Gelles has. And before concluding that it is provocative

*This sample is not random, but neither are most of the other data bases used in this area.

for women to voice complaints against their spouses, it should be remembered that even if she keeps hush, he may hit her anyway, this time for "sullen silence" or a lack of "deep emotional warmth." It is also worth asking whether he just possibly may deserve "nagging," a.k.a. a female voicing a grievance. If he does deserve it, then it would seem the original provocation, and the blame, are his. Too, of course, the usual correlational problem may apply: even if female nagging is loutish, perhaps battered naggers scold to retaliate for the physical victories their husbands have already won. In any case, what is clear is that the fault is not the wife's, nagger or not.

In sum, the "provocative wife" analysis amounts to accepting the husband's own self-aggrandizing version that it's all her fault. And when the literature offers examples of her provocation, it is unclear what the Parfait Wife can do to avoid provoking her aggrieved husband into beating her and the provocation-theory social scientist into claiming she asked for it. By the same token, however, if whatever she does is interpreted to encourage violence, then no particular thing she does can be blamed. As with socialization theory, here again we reach the conclusion that the wife does not play a role in her own abuse.

In the "learned helplessness" analysis, women remain in battered situations because they have acquired poor self-images and now believe they cannot end or escape the abuse. As the literature itself admits, however, frequently there <u>is</u> nothing they can do, and frequently they know that because they've tried everything already and it hasn't helped (Pagelow, 1981a). It isn't that women have <u>learned</u> they have no alternatives, it is that they <u>have</u> no alternatives. To notice this signifies rationality, not a poor self-image. And, significantly, battered women neither feel nor appear helpless about other aspects of their lives (Rousaville, 1978). They feel helpless

about battery because they are. The theory of "learned helplessness" merely labels as a peculiarity of the victim what is in fact a function of the situation, and thus diverts attention to her from it.

The final common way of attributing a causal role in wife-beating to the wife is the "personal resource" theory, in which he isn't man enough to rule the roost in the normal way, so she outshines him, so he hits her and becomes boss again. Or, in social science phrasing:

> ...One should find that violence is most common in those families where the classically dominant member (male-adult-husband) fails to possess the superior skills, talents or resources on which his preferred superior status is supposed to be legitimately based. Hence it was expected that violent behavior would be disproportionately prevalent in families where the husband-father was deficient relative to his wife-mother in achieved status characteristics (O'Brien, 1974:68).

The problem with this theory is that, as the copious literature on gender stratification implies, families in which she outscores him in status are very rare (Gillespie, 1971). Women are discriminated against in employment, in promotions, in job titles, and of course in pay, not to mention the John/Joan McKay kind of double standard in which women's performance is systematically denigrated compared to men's (Goldberg, 1968; Stromberg and Harkness, 1978). Under these circumstances, it would be astounding were researchers to find many of the purportedly wife-dominant or wife-superior families which supposedly drive husbands berserk. And in fact researchers don't. Nor, of course, do they abandon the personal resource theory. What they do instead is change the operational definition of "wife/dominant

wife/superior" so that it's a contest the husband can lose.* Thus, he may be compared to her on a variety of dimensions, and if he loses on one, any one, she wears the pants in the family, even if he wins on the rest. Or he may be compared not to her but to her father. Or he may be compared to her expectations of what an ideal husband should be: if he falls short in her mind, it's stressful and he hits her. Or the deficient husband may be compared to his own expectations of what an ideal husband or ideal man should be. (Notice, incidentally, that earlier we learned if she falls short of his expectations concerning Parfait Wives, that's stressful and he hits her. In other words, if anyone falls short of anyone's expectations, it's all her fault and we can see why he hits her.) Or, finally, if no comparison within the relationship shows him henpecked, the analysis can move outside the relationship and contrast him to other men. If he has less resources than they, or less power over her than they have over their wives, we may conclude there's a personal resource imbalance in her favor after all, and he is using violence to right the scales. For instance, Goode states that lower class husbands "may be impelled to use overt force because they lack other resources that yield power and force to middle or upper class parents and husbands" (1974:32). Fittingly, this last version of Nomenclatural Ways to End Male Dominance is most often used to explain why wife-beating occurs mainly in the lower classes, a fact which doesn't need explaining because it isn't true (Martin, 1976).

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*Neatly, this is often justified by means of socialization theory. As tots, husbands were habituated to continuous success. If the researcher can now devise a contest they may lose, so can they. This disgruntles them, and they hit. Unfortunately, since it is the human lot to lose occasionally, and the human experience mainly to bear it, this theory does not explain why husbands hit wives. Nor does it explain why wives should be called winners on any excuse in order that husbands may be called losers.

Incidentally, even when family power is scored in such a way that he may lose, it is not clear this produces battery. Adler, for instance, reports wives are victimized most often in husband-dominated marriages (1981).

In sum, the way the literature depicts the battered wife illustrates its sexism. She is considered to differ from officially unbattered women, and her purported differences are assumed to play some role in her own victimization. The particular role she is argued to play has to do with her supposed traditional sex-role socialization, provocative behavior, learned helplessness, and/or superiority in personal resources. But given the lack of either logical or empirical support for these depictions, this persistent emphasis on the wife simply reveals an a priori assumption of victim-blaming. It functions only to divert emphasis from male domination as the cause of wife-beating.

Solutions: Individual-Level Reforms

The same things happen with respect to the way literature handles solutions to wife abuse, and the general context in which it imbeds the problem. With respect to solutions, the literature does call for change in sex roles, but a closer examination of this proposal reveals that it is mainly the wife's role which is to change. The direction of change is to be that the wife get her head straight and liberate herself from antiquated sex role ideology (the solution implied by socialization theory), that she stop goading her husband into beating her (provocation theory), that she become more assertive and self-accepting (learned helplessness theory), or that she abandon her purported possibility of resource threat within the marriage so that her husband will no longer seize upon violence as a way to right the balance (personal resource theory). What is being called for here is a set of individual-level changes, not changes in the social structure. And, as we have already seen, there is no particular reason to believe any of these solutions can help. Instead, each encourages a continued focus on the wife, and a continued view of wife-beating as an aberrant phenomenon which occurs only in deviant families. Thus, with respect to solutions, again the literature blames more than befriends the beaten wife.

We cannot justify this victim-blaming prediction in the scientific choice of solutions by arguing that after all we need short-term individual-level reforms while we simultaneously fight for long-term structural changes. This may be true, but one still must choose one's short-term reforms. The particular ones advocated in the literature rest on analyses which are impediments to long-term structural change, rather than harmonious accompaniments to it. It is also true that the literature freely supports other proposals for change as well: shopping lists of them, in fact. But our impression is that many of the items on these lists appeared on movement lists before social science discovered wife-beating. And if the main contribution of science was to fluff out the lists with its own wife-focused solutions, again the question is whether science is more a hindrance than a help.

Wife Abuse in Socio-Political Context

The final issue with respect to which this question rises is the general context in which wife-beating is studied. Here the sexist bias of the literature reveals itself in parallels drawn between wife abuse and other social phenomena. These parallels commonly analogize wife abuse to attitudes towards violence in general, or to any other sort of violence at all (including female violence against men), rather than to other forms of male violence against women. The result is that wife abuse is stripped of its behavioral outcome and gender basis.

The most famous example of bowdlerization-by-analogy involves husband-beating, which Steinmetz claims to be as pervasive and serious as wife-abuse (e.g., Steinmetz, 1977-78). This argument has been strongly challenged by a number of critics, who have pointed out that since actually wife-beating is much more pervasive and serious, to equate the two is to take wife-beating

lightly (c.f., Fields and Kirchner, 1978, for a concise review of problems with the analogy). But most other analogies have fared better in the literature. Thus, wife abuse is analogized to public support for the death penalty and other attitudinal measures of support for violence in general (Gelles, 1975; Steinmetz, 1977; Steinmetz and Straus, 1974), as if a husband's actually beating his wife is essentially the same phenomenon as a "yes" verbal response to the question, "Do you approve of capital punishment?" Similarly, parallels are drawn between violence against children and violence against wives, without distinguishing the nature of the violence used or the circumstances in which it occurs, and thus with the implication that a mother's spanking her child, or siblings coming to blows, is equivalent to a husband's breaking his wife's ribs (Gayford, 1975; Gelles, 1972, 1978). What is left out in these inappropriate analogies is the context in which wife abuse occurs: the nature of the abuse, the situation itself, and the supposed role obligations of members within each relationship. An adult male assaulting an adult female is not like answering "yes" on a survey question, mildly disciplining a wayward child whose father assumes few parenting responsibilities, or siblings tussling. Because of the context in which wife abuse occurs, more appropriate analogies would be between wife-beating and rape, sexual assault, incest, sexual harrassment, and possibly the abuse of elderly women. But this latter form of analogy rests on a feminist analysis of wife abuse as occurring in the social context of male domination,*

*Similarly, expanding the analysis from sexism to oppression in general, wife abuse can be likened to any routine deployment of violence one group can call up to keep another subordinate. This would include routine violence in the maintenance of white hegemony, upper-class and heterosexual superordinance, etc.

Using this focus on power imbalances, one could also support the analogy in the literature between wife abuse and violence against children, concluding with a condemnation of both. However, we ourselves consider that the child/parent relation, though in many ways indeed a power imbalance, differs somewhat from such types of imbalance as wife abuse. More important, the literature itself rejects the notion of power imbalances entirely when it analogizes wife-beating to violence against children, and therefore for the purposes of this paper, the issue is moot. When the literature likens wives to children, the purported similarities have to do with the victim's irresponsibility, unacceptable comportment, or personal defenselessness, rather than with a common political subordinance. The idea is that wives, like children, may be irksome, but they still deserve protection. It is this context to which we are objecting.

and it is this context which the literature does not recognize, despite its calls for changes in sex roles.

The Scientific Context: The Road to Misogyny Is Paved With Good Intentions

In sum, despite its genuinely benevolent intentions, the wife-beating literature is riddled with misogyny. Its sexist biases may be seen with respect to its analyses of the causes, solutions, and context of the problem. Far from representing an alternative to sexist depictions of the family, the literature on wife abuse reiterates them. Under the rubric of concern for victims, it merely continues the tradition of victim-blaming it purports to challenge. And in consequence, it offers no thoroughgoing challenge to the myth of domestic tranquility, nor an insightful analysis of how male dominance operates in the specific context of heterosexual domicile. The women's movement may well have helped prod science into addressing the issue of wife-beating, as the literature acknowledges. But scientific gratitude, its own desires notwithstanding, does not extend to eschewing misogyny in its analyses.

In examining the case of wife-beating, we find grounds for concern not only with this specific literature, but also with science itself. The wife-beating literature is self-consciously and explicitly anti-sexist; its creators are sincerely and openly committed to advancing the situation of battered wives and of women in general. But what has resulted is sexism as usual. Were science purely objective, this could not have occurred. Were science itself simply a tool which could be put to whatever use its practitioners choose, this could not have occurred. Were science the product of its producers' wills and intentions, this could not have occurred. The only circumstances which can explain the sexism of the wife-beating literature are, first, that science itself is an institution rather than an independent realm of ideas. And second, as an institution, science itself is shaped by and reinforces the sexism of the society in which it exists. In the process, it molds what we as scientists do much more than our good intentions appear to mold it.

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